

Sir J. William Dawson,

C.M.G., LL.D., F.R.S., F.G.S. &c.

Born, October 13th, 1820

Died, November 19th, 1899

From 1855 to 1893 Principal of McGill University
... Montreal ...

1899
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With Compliments
Lucy Dawson

Wm. H. H. H. H.

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Jan 1900

On Monday November 20th, the day following that of the death of Sir William Dawson, a Special Meeting was convened at the University and attended by Governors, the Principal, Teaching Staff, and Students, when the following addresses were given.

Principal Peterson, after reading the Ninetieth Psalm, spoke as follows :

“Since we met in our various class rooms last week, a great and good life has been brought to its appointed end. Sir William Dawson had considerably overpassed the span of life of which the Psalmist speaks : it was ‘by reason of strength’ that it was for him well-nigh fourscore years. Ever since he assumed the principalship in Nov. 1855—that is for a period of exactly 44 years—he has been the most prominent figure connected with this University. The last six years of his life—since 1893—have been spent, it is true, in retirement from active work, but he has been with us in spirit all this time. Many of us know how closely, and with what a fatherly

interest, he has followed all our later history. And now his life has closed, in great physical weakness, but happily unaccompanied by distress or suffering :

‘Of no distemper, of no blast he died,
But fell like autumn fruit that mellow’d long.’

“Busy, active and strenuous all his days, he must have chafed, I fancy, during recent years under a growing sense of uselessness,—almost an impatience at being laid aside from work, which had been to him so long the very breath of life ; yet none ever said with more simple, child-like resignation, ‘Thy way, not mine !’ For such a painless passing out of life no note of sorrow need be struck. There is no sting in a death like his ; the grave is not his conqueror. Rather has death been swallowed up in victory—the victory of a full and complete life, marked by earnest endeavour, untiring industry, continuous devotion and self-sacrifice, together with an abiding and ever-present sense of dependence on the will of Heaven. His work was done, to quote the Puritan poet’s noble line, ‘As ever in his great Task-master’s eye :’ and never for a moment did he waver in his feeling of personal responsibility to a personal God. Others will speak to you of his record as a scientific man. I shall permit myself only to say that few can have an adequate idea of the power and forcefulness revealed in the mere fact that one who had so onerous a part to play as a

college head should have been able to keep up scientific work at all. A weaker nature would have exhausted itself in the problems of administration.

"He, himself, has left it on record, in his paper entitled 'Thirty-eight years of McGill,' that these years were 'filled with anxieties and cares, and with continuous and almost unremitting labour.' There are on my library table at the present time three volumes in which three college presidents may be said to have summed up the life-work it has been given them to do for the institutions with which they were severally connected,—Caird of Glasgow, Eliot of Harvard, and Gilman of Johns Hopkins. The first was a massive intellect which, in the security of a long-established University system, delighted to deal, in a series of addresses to the Glasgow students, with such subjects as the unity and progressiveness of the sciences, the study of history, the study of art, and the place in human development of Erasmus and Galileo, Bacon, Hume, and Bishop Butler. The two American presidents have lived more in the concrete and they have put on record their attitude to and their methods of dealing with the various problems they have had to face in the educational world in which their work has been done. And alongside their memorial volumes I like to place a still more unpretending collection of 'Educational Papers,' which Sir William Dawson circulated among his friends. They mark the various stages, full of struggle and stress at every point, of his

college administration, and they form a record of what he was able to accomplish—apart from his work as a geologist—in the sphere of education; for the High School and the Normal School of this city, for the schools of the province, and above all for McGill itself, which he found in 1855 a mere college with eighty students, and which he raised to the level of a great university with over a thousand.

“And not even in his well-earned retirement could he permit himself to be idle. To me, one of the most touching sights in the first year of my arrival here was the indomitable perseverance with which every day the well-known figure of the old Principal would make its way, bag in hand, across the campus to the museum he loved so well, there to work for a time among the valuable collections which the university owes to his zeal, industry and devotion. It was in 1841 that he published his first scientific paper, and the activity which began then was continued down to the Thursday in the week before his death, when some reference to the mining industry of this country suggested to him that once more, with failing hand and wearied brain, he should put pen to paper on the subject of the ‘Gold of Ophir’. And now he has entered into his rest,—affectionately tended to the last by the gentle care of a devoted and heroic wife, and solaced by the presence of a distinguished son, a loving daughter. The world had no power to hold

him any more. His work was done, and his spirit yearned to pass beyond all earthly bounds. More fitly even than a younger man, whose death came very near to me in August of this year, could Sir William, in his great and growing weakness, have echoed the cry that he uttered, amid greater suffering :

‘ Never weather-beaten sail more willing bent to shore,
Never tired pilgrim’s limbs affected slumber more,
Than my wearied sprite now longs to fly out of my troubled breast :
O, come quickly, sweetest Lord, and take my soul to rest.’

“ He is gone, and we shall see his living face no more. But teachers and students alike may have ever with them the inspiration of his noble life, and the stimulus of his high example. What he was to those who were so long his colleagues, I leave others on this occasion to set before us : my closing words to the students of McGill must be the expression of a confident hope that the record of Sir William’s life and work will always be an abiding memory in this place. If you will bear it about with you in your hearts, not only will you be kept from lip service, slackness, half-heartedness in your daily duties,—and from the graver faults of youth, at which his noble soul would have revolted, from dishonesty, sensuality and impurity in every form ; but you will be able, each in his sphere, to realize more fully the ideal of goodness and truth, so that at the last you too may hear the voices whispering, as they have now spoken to him : ‘ Well done, thou good and faithful servant ; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’ ”

Dr. Alex. Johnson, Vice-Principal and Dean of the Faculty of Arts, said : " You have heard that it is just forty-four years this month since Principal Dawson gave his inaugural address in this university. Forty-four years seems a long time when measured by the life of man, but it is short when measured by the duration of universities, and we cannot fairly estimate the work done during the thirty-eight years in which he held office, without noticing how young the University really is. Then we shall be judges of its wonderful growth. Students now in the professional faculties, who have taken the full course in Arts, can tell their fellow-students what they have seen of recent progress. The college grounds are now crowded with buildings. Seven years ago the only buildings opened and in use were the centre building, the museum and the front part of the medical building. No buildings then existed for engineering, or physics, or the library, or chemistry. A large part of the medical building has been added within that time. So much for seven years.

"Going back only twelve years, we find that the Chancellor of that time, the Hon. James Ferrier, had been president of the Royal Institution (the present Board of Governors), before the new charter was obtained in 1852, in getting which he took an active part. It was only last January (ten months ago), that Dr. Meredith, who was principal for seven years—1846-1853—before the accession of Sir William Dawson, died.

"At the present moment we have, happily, among us, although on the retired list, three of the fifteen professors in Medicine and Arts who received Principal Dawson at his inauguration. The University then is young.

"What has been its growth? The academic faculty, when Mr. Dawson came as principal, had only four professors, of whom some were volunteers serving gratuitously. He made a fifth, himself as professor of geology. There was no professor of chemistry, none of botany, none of zoology. He took all these upon himself rather than leave the faculty so bare. His powers of working were indefatigable, and as professor he used them to the utmost for many years, until gradually relieved; but I think it ought to be remembered that he had charge of both geology and zoology, until he was seventy years of age. I thought it my duty to call attention in Corporation, about the year 1890, to the fact that he was overburdened. He was at that time giving fourteen lectures weekly, in addition to doing all his work as principal, and other outside work besides.

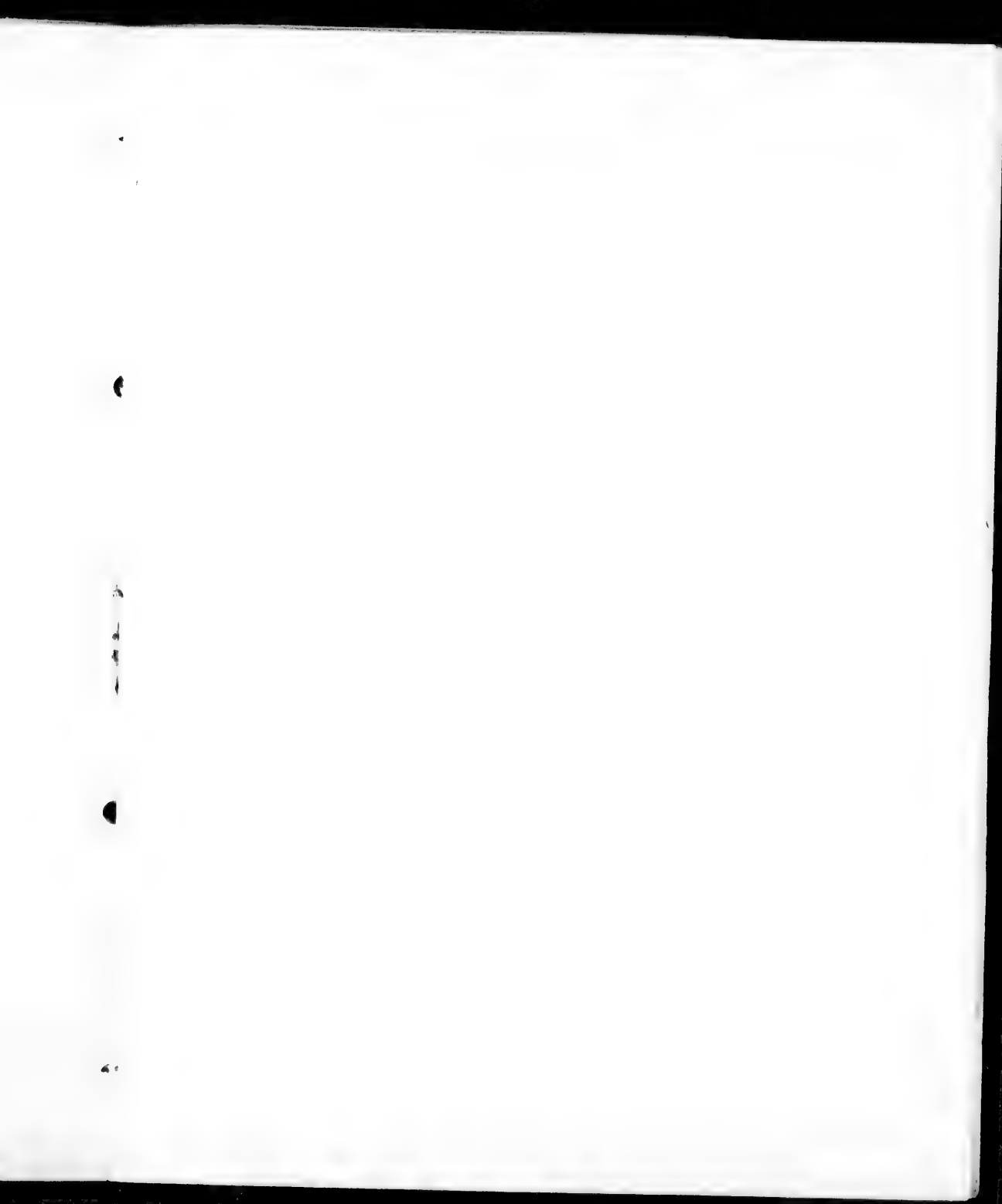
"But, although indefatigable powers of work, combined with scientific ability and experience in teaching, made him an able professor over a wide range of subjects, yet these would not have made him successful as a principal had it not been for the power with which he was specially endowed, namely, administrative ability.

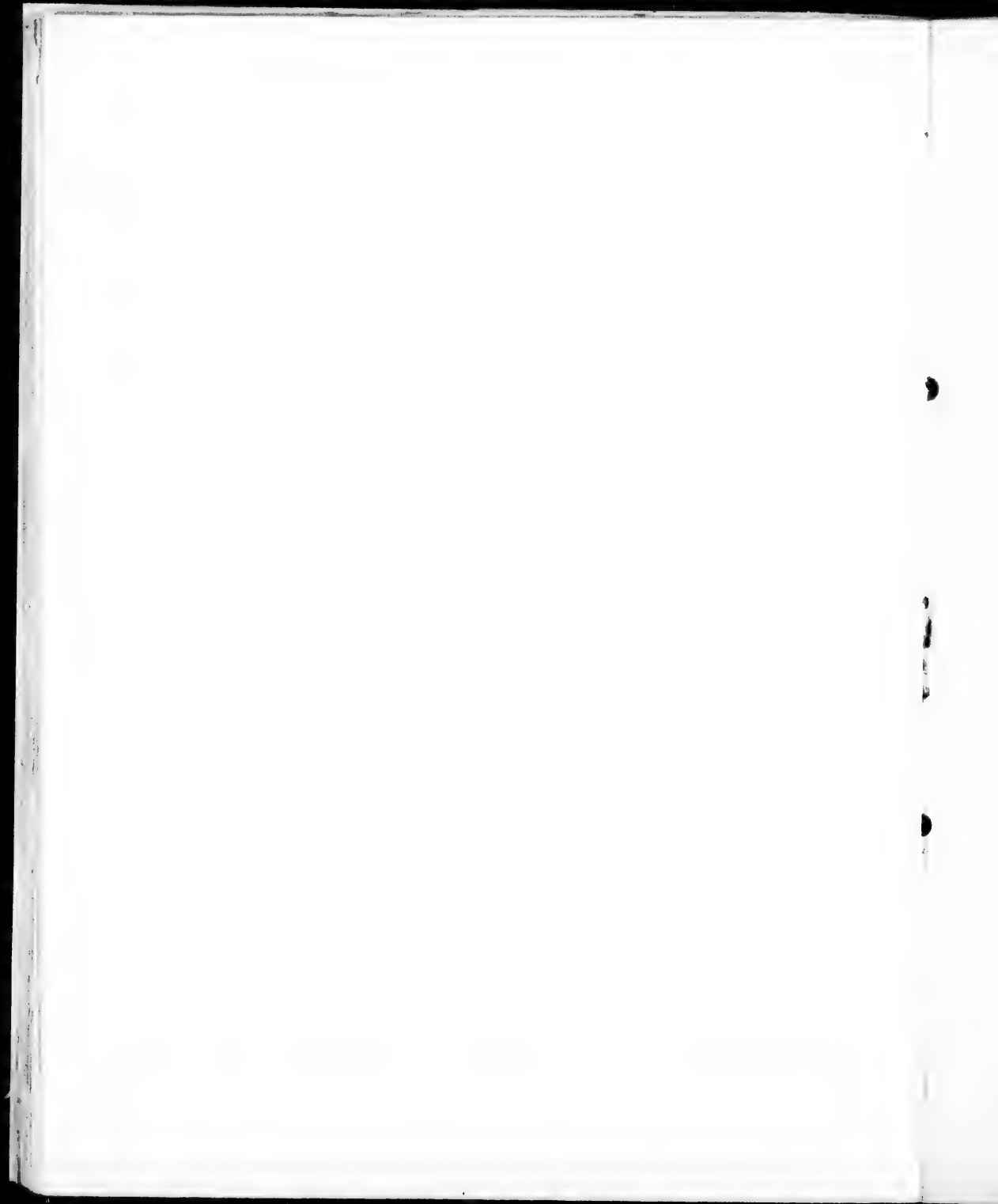
"Great commanders, we know, are rare. If a rich nation places all its resources at the disposal of a general

and he is successful, he is applauded and honoured to the utmost ; for the future of the nation many have depended on his skill. What, then, does that general deserve who has had first to create the resources himself, and then has used them successfully ?

"This was Principal Dawson's position at starting. It may be said briefly that the University had no resources. Those that existed are not worth mentioning. He had to create by getting the whole community to work with him ; and he did it. The professors in the college, the merchants in the city, the teachers in the country, their rulers in the Council of Public Instruction, men interested in arts and manufactures, the religious bodies all over Canada—he was in touch with one and all. He gained their attention, gained their respect and admiration, gained their enthusiastic aid ; and hence, you have now McGill University, with a great endowment, and a great revenue.

"I have said nothing of his work as Principal of the Normal School, and as professor in it for many years, nor of the consequent drain upon his time and energy. Nor can I more than allude to a great deal of other work of his. Of the numberless scientific papers he has written, of the books he has published, of the honours he obtained at home and abroad—fellowships of scientific societies, presidencies of the great Scientific Associations of Great Britain and America (he was the only man who had the honour of presiding over both bodies)—there is





no need for me to speak. Of the great work he did in showing the harmony between science and religion, I have no doubt others will speak.

"A great man has passed away from us, but his works survive; and his memory will be cherished as long as the University which he built up continues to benefit those for whom he laboured so strenuously. This is the test of success to which he has himself appealed."

Dr. Craik, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, said that since the death of Sir William Dawson, the feeling uppermost in his mind was one of deep personal loss. He was one of the men who had attended the inaugural lecture of Sir William, as well as the whole of his first course of lectures on Botany and Zoology. He had only graduated the year before, and it was in the following year that he was officially appointed to a position on the teaching staff of the College, so that Sir William formed a connecting link between those two important events in his life. Ever since that time his relations with Sir William had been constant and intimate, and he had ever looked on his Principal with mingled feelings of love and reverence. At the time of his first appearance in McGill it was hard to detect the latent powers that lay in Sir William, and it was not until he had over-

come many of the difficulties that lay in his path that it was realized that a great man was in their midst. He did for McGill what perhaps no other man could have done,—he saved its very existence. The incubus of inertia had long settled upon it so heavily that nothing but herculean effort, such as Sir William put forth, could have lifted it.

Sir William Dawson accomplished as much good by his example as by his precept. He was not a man to carp and preach at those under him or to constantly remind a man of his faults, but his example was ever one worthy of following, and his life was a living sermon. He possessed in a rare degree the power to get the best possible work out of his assistants. Never in his life had he seen Sir William's equal as a teacher. He had such a clear and forceful way of arranging and stating his facts and knowledge, that it was impossible for anyone to listen to one of his lectures without getting the best possible idea of the subject in question. He was a man of most lovable disposition, and if he had one fault it was because of his tender loving heart. Some had blamed him for the manner in which he had ever refused to dismiss a professor without first gently pointing out his mistakes and trying his best to help the man, but even in this, "his failing leaned to virtue's side." He was like a loving father to the professors, guiding, correcting

and even taking their burdens on his own shoulders when too great for their strength. He was ever like the willing horse on whom the heaviest burdens are laid and on whom were heaped duties that did not properly belong to him, but which he, nevertheless, accepted without complaint.

Professor Cox said : "You have heard from some who have been his life-long friends and fellow-workers what they have found it in them to say of Sir William Dawson; and now it is my privilege to add a few words as one who came to know him later in life.

"We are conscious that already six generations of students have passed through this university to whom he was no more than a name, and we would fain use these precious moments to call up before you some vivid and personal impression of the man. But how poor are words as substitutes for the personal touch ! It is easy to say that he was a scholar of distinguished—almost encyclopædic—learning ; that in science he attained the very highest honours ; and that he made McGill—nay, it would be truer to say that for thirty-eight years he was McGill. True, he found a group of benefactors, such as surely no man ever before had at his beck and call,—men who possessed not only the means

but the far-sighted public spirit to employ them for great ends under his guidance ; he had able and faithful colleagues, some of whom are with us still ; and, perhaps best of all, he had many, many hundreds of students who, so far knew how to profit by his teaching and example that they have spread the fame of McGill broadcast over the land. But to the world at large, which loves always to crystallize its ideas round a man, McGill was Sir William Dawson, and Sir William Dawson was McGill.

“But though we have been proud to remember that he was probably the greatest palæontologist this continent has produced, and have felt our hearts swell with gratitude to him as the father of McGill, it is not of this that we have been chiefly thinking since yesterday, and wish to remind you to-day. It is the gracious personality of the man. When I passed yesterday evening and saw the flag at half mast, drooping mournfully in the dim light, I thought of the thousands of times the familiar figure had entered through the portals below. There is not a corner of this building that fancy does not people with that figure, from this hall, where he has conducted so many public ceremonies of the University to the east wing, where in the old days the cheerful lights at night used to assure us that the head and heart of McGill was busily at work.

"His personality impressed strangers at first sight. Quite lately the deep sympathy he always felt for the weak and the oppressed led him to take a characteristically keen interest in the poor Doukhobors ; and when a venerable member of the Society of Friends, who had made many journeys on their behalf, paid me a visit, I begged him to call on Sir William, and give him an account of them. He came back presently to thank me, with his face strangely illumined and said. 'I have seen William Dawson, and we have been very near the gates of heaven.'

"The first thing to strike a newcomer was a courtesy so marked that you might call it courtliness. It was so real, because it was based on such genuine consideration for all. You might see him explaining some simple matter to a child, or go to him with some trivial difficulty, and you felt sure that his great powers were as freely at your service as if he were presiding at the councils of the University, and shaping its policy. What dignity it lent to our public ceremonies ! The peculiar gesture with which he 'capped' the graduating class at the granting of degrees has often struck me as conveying at one motion a patent of knight-errantry and a benediction.

"Next you felt the native power of the man. I have never met a finer instance of the mailed hand in the velvet glove. He had all the qualities of the great statesman ; breadth of view, combined with grasp of detail ;

foresight that makes the record of his life read like the written fulfilment of the plans of his youth ; insight that led him straight to the kernel of any difficulty ; swift decision to deal with emergencies great and small, as they arose ; patience and tireless industry, and method, that enabled him to make the most of his work. He was a born ruler, a born teacher, a born investigator. Any one of these gifts is exceptional ; the combination of two of them is unusual ; but to find all three united in one man is rare, indeed. And withal there was refinement and distinction, the keen edge of the finely tempered tool.

“But, after all, to use Walt Whitman’s rugged phrase, ‘That which enables a man to stand with aplomb before his fellow men is character.’

“The pre-eminent note of Sir William’s character was, to my mind, his singleness of purpose, his simplicity. How incredibly far-off all meanness and baseness seemed from him. You might disagree with him, or think him masterful ; but as well grasp the poles and draw them together as try to associate pettiness or self-seeking with him. In the pursuit of objects he thought worthy, he disdained no task, however trivial, spared no sacrifice. And was there really anything in which Sir William was not interested ? He seemed to catch the full zest of life as it passed, and let nothing find him blunted, or dull,

or weary. In Pater's beautiful words :—‘To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life.’

“In one word, he was fit to be the example of the thousands of young men who frequent a university. That is a word of solemn import—to us who are set in posts of authority, to be your guides, and to you, on whom is laid the responsibility of choosing the best that is in us to give you, and rejecting all wherein we fail.

“We are met to celebrate, with proud grief, if you will, the safe conclusion of a noble and glorious life, which has now been sealed with the everlasting sleep. Hereafter nothing can harm it, nor any tarnish come near it. He who for eighty years so strenuously maintained its lofty tenor, has inherited rest. But in this university the memory of it will be our sacred and inviolable possession. There will doubtless be outward memorials, but better even than these splendid piles of dead stone about us, will be the living witnesses who have drunk in his spirit, and illustrate it in their own lives. In a world of poor ideals, ambitions taken up at random and followed unstably, the value of one such concrete instance of a life well planned and well lived, devoted to high ends, is beyond price. When the loss of such a leader shakes us for a moment out of the dull routine of habit, we do well to pause and consider, ‘Have we

chosen well?' We think perhaps of great fortune and the statesman's power, and these are good so far as they bring opportunity for service ; of literary fame or scientific renown,—who shall decry them in these halls?—of a profession faithfully and successfully followed—there is no better life work for most of us.

“But when the end comes, shall we be satisfied? Listen to his own words, in the farewell University Lecture :—‘My life at McGill has been fraught with the happiness which results from conscious effort in a worthy cause.’

“I say again that Sir William Dawson was fit to be an example set before the young men of a university. But if I stopped there, knowing the devout faith by which he lived, he would rightly hold me guilty of treason to all that he held most dear. Many of us in this room could not see eye to eye with him on matters of dogma, but this we know, that the example on which he modelled his life is the highest and best that has been vouchsafed to men ; and if he attained excellence worthy of our imitation, it was because first and last he sought to make his life a type of Christ.”

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write,
Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth : Yea,
saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours ; and their
works do follow them."—Rev. xiv., 13.

I knew him not as those who shared the way
He traversed, or who came beneath his sway ;
But, casual crossing of his path, I found
That where he walked it was perpetual day.

Perpetual day of noble act and thought,
Science and faith unto one purpose brought,
Good for his fellow beings, and our lives
Are better for the lessons he has taught.

His school of thought abided not the new,
(Yet who has come that hath the perfect view ?)
But, if a life that profiteth be aught,
His life, his work, his thought, his faith, were true.

All to one cadence like a perfect chord,—
And as the clod beat on the hollow board,
The sunlight broke, and from the sky a voice
"Blessed are they who slumber in the Lord."

B. D.

Montreal, 21st November, 1899.